

Preview of The Inean Debacle: The Price of Peace

The elevator doors slid opened and Ambassador Wilcox entered the bridge and walked up to Hackett. “Captain, have you secured the diamonds you needed from the Kosuan?” he asked.

“Yes, Ambassador, we did, and on behalf of the crew I want to thank you for your help! Our engineer is checking to see if they are usable as we speak,” Hackett replied sarcastically.

Wilcox heard the captain’s tone and let it go for now. It would sound much better in his report to the vice admiral. “Good, then we can finally get on our mission to Inea.”

The ambassador was up to something and Hackett knew it. Wilcox began to walk away but stopped and turned to face Hackett. “Oh, by the way, Captain, Command wasn’t very pleased with the report I sent them about you. I’m sure you’ll be hearing from them soon. I wouldn’t be surprised if they overrule you on your points of interest.” After he said that he looked at Benson and bumped her chair as he walked passed.

Hackett knew what he meant and chose to ignore it for now. The ambassador entered the elevator and left the bridge without saying another word.

Suddenly, and without warning, the ship dropped out of the worm hole and the lights throughout the ship dimmed to a minimum level. The yellow warning lights began to flash. The light on Hackett’s comm-pad began to blink on his chair.

“Hackett here,” he said after he hit the open button.

“Sir, this is O’Toole, we just burned up our last diamond. We will finish the shutdown process and begin fitting the ones provided by the Kosuan. Unfortunately, this is going to be a slow process, sir,” he said.

Everyone on the bridge heard the message and knew what was at stake. If the *Saratoga* was attacked they would not be able to use shields or laser cannons for very long. Long-range scans showed ships in the area, including several Kosuan and Inean warships.

“How long do you need, Commander?” Hackett asked calmly.

“At least half a day, sir. These Kosuan diamonds, as you know, are not the best and are crudely cut. We will have to rework these considerably for them to be useful, Sir,” O’Toole said.

“Very well, Commander, use whatever you need to make them work. Even if you partially install a few of them so we can protect

ourselves while you finish the rest,” Hackett said.

“That will work, Captain. O’Toole out.”

Hackett turned to Giovanella. “Mr. Giovanella, rig the ship for silent running and Commander Morris initiate energy conservation level five, please.”

Both men went to work informing the crew of the orders. Hackett turned to look at Bowers at the sensors console. “Mr. Bowers, keep me informed about the ships in the vicinity. I want to know the second anyone comes this way.”

“Yes, Captain. We do have two Inean ships that will pass close to our position in about three-and-a-half hours,” he replied as several lights dimmed and several computers shut down to save what little power they had.

“Lieutenant Larson, manually load the torpedo tubes and set for manual firing, just in case.” Hackett said.

“Aye, sir,” she replied. She locked her station and left the bridge.

Several minutes passed and the elevator lift doors opened. Ambassador Wilcox stomped onto the bridge. “What is the meaning of interrupting my communications with Alliance Command?” he demanded as he landed in front of Hackett.

“Ambassador, we just burned out our last crystal and we are running silent until we regain full power again. There are plenty of Inean and Kosuan ships out there within close proximity to us that would love nothing more than to take a few pokes at us. So, until full power is restored there will be no external communications of any type. Now, please get off my bridge.” Hackett’s demeanor was calm but he remained firm with a slight twist of annoyance towards Wilcox.

Wilcox, however, on the other hand wasn’t ready to let it go. “Captain, I demand that you allow me to continue my communication with headquarters. If you do not, I will assume command of this vessel under article one-three-nine.”

“That won’t do you any good, Ambassador, because we are dead in the water right now. If we are attacked, we don’t have shields and we could only muster a few short bursts of laser power. Thus, if we are attacked by an Inean or Kosuan ship we are dead for certain. Do you understand?” Hackett was becoming more agitated and it was coming out in the tone of his voice.

“Restore communications right now or you are relieved, Captain!

This is a trick of yours to prevent the reception of the new orders from Command.” Wilcox was becoming more angry and his face was getting red. He leaned in on Hackett, which wasn’t the best idea. “I know what you are up to Hackett, and it won’t work!”

“I cannot and will not. The safety of this crew comes first, Ambassador, and your article one-three-nine does not apply here, so leave the bridge or I will have security escort you to your quarters -again.” Hackett’s tone was beginning to show an obvious edge and he was determined to get under Wilcox’s skin with his emphasizing “again,” which he noticed got to Wilcox. Hackett was at the end of his tolerance of the ambassador. “Oh, and I have no need to avoid orders, Ambassador! The vice admiral already settled our previous discussion.”

Wilcox stood in front of Hackett and reached into his pocket and removed a laser pistol and pointed it at Hackett. “Captain Shawn Hackett, you are hereby relieved of command effective immediately,” he said, pointing the gun at Hackett’s head. Hackett could hear the whine of the laser building its charge to fire so he knew it was a live one.

“If I don’t, you will shoot me, Ambassador?” Hackett asked as he stood in front of the ambassador with his arms now folded.

“If I have to, Captain, I will, now get off the bridge.” Wilcox was shaking and could shoot the captain by accident.

Hackett remained composed and sat back in the chair. “You are committing mutiny, Ambassador, which is a serious crime. I will not leave this chair and the crew will not follow your orders. If you kill me, then there is no one to turn the command codes over to you.”

“You have 30 seconds, Captain!” Wilcox said, hands shaking as he pointed the gun at the captain.

“Mr. Morris, have security come to the bridge and remove the ambassador,” Hackett requested.

“Yes, Captain!” Morris said, as everyone on the bridge had turned to watch the showdown.

“Don’t you dare touch that button, Commander!” Wilcox yelled, but it was too late. Morris had already called for security.

Hackett pressed the comm button on his wrist watch. “Miss Larson, are the torpedo tubes loaded?”

“Yes, Captain,” she replied over the tinny sounding speaker.

“You! You get away from that console!” Wilcox stammered as he

swung his laser from side to side not sure of where he should be pointing it.

“Close the launch tube doors and set the torpedoes to detonate in,” he paused a moment to look at Wilcox and then continued, “30 seconds,” as Wilcox trained his laser back towards Hackett.

“Yes, sir,” Larson replied.

“I will pull the trigger, Captain. You have 10 seconds,” Wilcox said.

“All that means is I won’t be here when the ship goes nova, and if I don’t stop the countdown soon, I won’t be able to. YOU have 5 seconds to put that gun down or you will die right after me.”

Several seconds passed and Hackett looked at Wilcox. “Shouldn’t you have pulled the trigger by now? Why am I still alive?”

He did not answer and four security guards spilled onto the bridge, two from each elevator. They took up positions by the doors and aimed their guns at Wilcox. Benson, Davies and Giovannella evacuated their seats because they were in the line of fire should the guards have to shoot. The computer was counting down the seconds and made it under 10. Wilcox turned and looked at all the concerned and scared faces around the bridge. The last one he looked at was Benson’s, and he threw his gun down to the floor. Hackett immediately ordered Larson to cancel the self-destruct and the guards overpowered the ambassador and took him away.

A sigh of relief went up around the bridge as everyone was relieved this latest episode was over. Hackett looked around the bridge and decided it was time to switch duty shifts. This would give the regulars a chance to unwind and grab a cup of coffee.

Once the change was complete Hackett looked at the tactical grid showing the ships in the area. His estimate was that they had two hours to get the quantum generators up and running and then bring the energizer back on line. He left the bridge to Morris who was working on his reports. Hackett went to the galley and got a coffee, and was about to walk back out the door when Benson came up behind him.

“Captain, may I have a word?” she requested.

Hackett turned to look at her and wondered what she wanted. He had to let her speak. “What’s on your mind, Lieutenant Commander?”

She finished pouring her coffee and followed Hackett to a table in the middle of the room. “Would you have destroyed the ship over

Wilcox?" she asked.

"Lieutenant Commander, what is the minimum time to program a torpedo to detonate?" he asked while staring into her blue eyes.

"One minute." And now she knew. "So you told Larson to program thirty seconds which was a code."

"Yep, and that fool Wilcox took it, hook, line and sinker."

"Were you not concerned that he would shoot you? He is nuts." she asked while holding her coffee mug with two hands and taking a sip.

"Actually, yes. He was shaking so much, I anticipated that he may get a shot off without wanting to. He didn't though. He may be a fool, but he is a smart fool," Hackett replied with a slight grin.

"What happens now?" she hesitated.

"I will need to bring in Channing to discuss how we proceed and then we will plan our mission. As far as your role goes, I would imagine that you would keep your clothes."

"That's reassuring."

"I would hope so."

Hackett could hear the crunching of the spiders biting him in his mind and he was thinking not now. He stared at Benson as she took a sip of her coffee and followed with licking her lips. He envisioned kissing those lips again and the crunching subsided in his mind. He filed it away as a coincidence.

"Is there anything else?" he asked, because he could sense that there was more coming.

"It's just that I am not accustomed to this seat-of-your-pants, make-it-up-as-you-go, mentality. I think it will take some time getting used to this," she said.

Hackett looked at her for a moment. "Well, Lieutenant Commander, this is life on the edge, this is where you wanted to be, and from my standpoint, you are adapting quite well." He paused a moment and looked into her eyes. "The rules out here are different and 'we' are writing the book on how future generations interact with these cultures. Hang in there and let's get back to work," Hackett said and they both got up and went back into the corridor.

"Thank you, Captain," Benson replied once in the corridor. She was relieved, in a way, from what he said. *How did he know what I was feeling?* she wondered as she walked away. It was like, he saw right

through her and now she was scared for a different reason. Hackett knew what she was thinking! Or was it just coincidence? *Couldn't be*, she thought. It wasn't the first time he answered a question she had only thought to ask. He knew she was there for other reasons.

"Captain Hackett to the bridge," came Morris' nervous voice over the speaker on the ceiling. Hackett replied to the page that he was on his way.

Hackett entered the dimly lit bridge and spied Morris at the sensors console reviewing the information handed him. He looked up when Hackett arrived. "Captain, there are two Inean ships coming our way. They have changed course and speed to intercept us in just over an hour. O'Toole says it will be at least that long before we could be underway again."

"I see, Commander," Hackett said as he took a turn at the viewer. "Get down to the engine room and assist anyway you can. We need those engines and energizer back online before they get here."

"Yes sir, on my way," Morris replied.

Morris walked into the engine room and paused for a second and watched people scrambling about. The mood was frantic. Everyone knew that they would come under attack very soon and they had no shields to protect them from the Inean lasers and torpedoes. O'Toole was at a worktable with the empty power coupling lattice suspended from an overhead beam. He was cleaning the grid and removing bits of old crystals to make room for the new gold-coated diamond crystals. At another station, two technicians used a precision-cutting laser to shape the Kosuan crystals to fit the Alliance grid. This was a slow, tedious process and was measured in thousandths of a millimeter. If he cut the crystals wrong then they would be useless, and they had already wasted one. They could not afford to waste any more.

"Lieutenant Barrows, how are those crystals coming?" O'Toole asked with a slight edge to his voice.

"I'll have a second one ready for you in a couple of minutes, sir," he replied without taking his eyes off the display.

"Let me have the first one then," he said to Barrows.

Barrows handed it to him and O'Toole mounted it in a machine and coated the diamonds with gold. After a minute, he removed the gold-plated diamond and cleaned it. He fumbled with it and nearly dropped it on the floor which would have shattered it to pieces. O'Toole cursed his clumsiness and tried again. After a few minutes,

Barrows handed him another crystal to install and he began the next one.

O'Toole was having trouble making them fit properly. The crystals had to be aligned precisely to produce the most power and not burn out like the last ones did. The crystals needed to be positioned in a way that allowed the hot plasma created in the mix chamber to flow smoothly over them and produce the enormous electrical charge needed in the quantum field coils. If a jagged edge stood out or the grid was bent causing the plasma to flow differently, not only would the crystals burn, it could also cause a burn-through in the casing and cause a catastrophic problem. He had two crewmen bring a laser-alignment fixture to the table and set it up around the grid. The three of them worked on the grid and finally got the first one in position. O'Toole secured it into place and started on the second one.

Time was ticking by and Morris remained standing off to the side while O'Toole fought with the stubborn matrix. Morris didn't say anything while O'Toole was fitting the second crystal. Barrows had placed another crystal on a foam pad that was on the table by O'Toole and he went back to cut another.

Morris walked over and watched Barrows set up the jig to hold the crude crystals. It was a difficult task and the pressure to hurry was taking its toll. Barrows nearly dropped the crystal as he attempted to set it in the fixture. Morris jumped in and held it for him so he could secure it in the proper position.

Once secured, Barrows gave Morris a nod of thanks. Morris then stepped back and observed as the master machinist dialed up his settings and made the cutting lasers dance all around the crystal. He carved it to perfection in minutes when it would normally take nearly an hour for anyone else to do the same job.

Morris glanced at the clock on the wall and realized they needed more time. It was taking an average of 10 minutes to cut and place the crystals in the grid. It turned out that they would need 10 minutes more than they had. The Inean ships would be here before they completed their task. He contacted the bridge. "Captain, this is Morris in engineering," he said.

"Go ahead, Commander," Hackett replied over the tinny speaker.

"Sir, we are wrapping up down here, but we need a few more minutes. It would be a good idea if we fired the plasma drive and run the other way to buy us those few minutes," Morris said.

"Good idea, Commander, Mr. Roberts, lay in a reverse course and

go to full reverse thrust,” Hackett said and he ended the comm-link to Morris.

With the Inean ships closing in on firing range, Hackett recalled his main bridge crew to take over. Once everyone was in place, he ordered Giovanella to contact the lead ship and ask their intentions. He tried and tried, but there was no reply.

It was now less than 10 minutes to go. Hackett was beginning to get nervous and he called engineering. They were moving as fast as they could, however they still needed more time. One last crystal to install and O’Toole had it in his hands. The Inean ships were nearly upon them when he got it fitted. He glued it into place and let it set a few seconds. He released the alignment fixture and had the two crewmen hold the matrix while he unhooked it from the overhead beam. The fixture was heavy and both men struggled with it. They began to walk back to the mix chamber when the ship shook violently. The men stumbled and nearly lost their grip on the grid. The red warning lights came on as they stumbled and regained control at the last second, then proceeded to the chamber and installed the grid.

On the bridge, Benson moved the *Saratoga* away from an Inean torpedo that exploded close to the ship. The Inean ships continued to close in. Hackett turned to look at Larson who was at her tactical station. “Larson, fire a full spread of torpedoes now!” he commanded.

“Aye, sir, firing,” she said and several red streaks immediately flew from the underside of the *Saratoga*. Some hit their targets and a couple missed.

“Helm, turn us around and use our aft engines to give us more speed,” Hackett ordered.

Benson and Davies spun the ship around and fired the thrusters in unison. However, one Inean ship was close enough to fire its lasers and hit the *Saratoga* in the hangar bay doors causing one of the huge doors to buckle. Another blast carved a hole under the hangar bay close to the aft torpedo launchers. Larson looked at the red lights on her panel and the message displayed on her monitor “No response -- aft torpedoes.” She looked over to Hackett, “Captain, we have lost contact with our aft torpedo launchers.”

Hackett heard her and didn’t acknowledge the message. Instead he called down to engineering for the latest status report and was told everything was in place and they were starting the energizer now.

After a few seconds, the ship began to vibrate from the massive energizer coming to life. Larson reported that she had shields and was

raising them. Before they came up completely, another Inean laser rocked the ship hard as it tore into the starboard-side nacelle that would prevent the ship from creating a worm hole and escaping.

“Shields holding, Captain, lasers almost charged,” Larson reported.

In spite of Benson’s fancy moves, the Inean ships managed to slide up on either side of the *Saratoga* and proceeded to fire at the sides of the ship. Most of the Inean laser blasts were targeted at the engineering section. The Ineans needed to get the *Saratoga*’s shields down while the ship was still weak so they could finish the job. If they did not succeed soon, then the fight would be lost forcing them to continue on a more important mission.

“Captain, we have full power to our laser cannons!” Larson reported to Hackett.

“Fire port and starboard lasers at those ships until they move off, Lieutenant,” Hackett said.

Bright blue beams of light repeatedly fired from the laser cannons on the underside of the primary hull of the ship and struck the Inean vessels in their midsections. The constant barrage made the sides of the Inean ships hulls begin to glow red from the energy they absorbed. The Inean commanders realized that they had blown their opportunity and broke off the attack before their ships were destroyed. Both ships went to high speed towards the Kosuan outpost that the *Saratoga* just came from to complete their mission.

“Damage reports?” Hackett ordered.

Larson was already on it and had a preliminary list. “Sir, we have damage to the aft torpedo launchers, hangar bay doors, and minor hull fractures, all in the secondary hull. The engine room reports an overload in the starboard nacelle and it should be fixed in about 20 minutes. There are no casualties or injuries to report.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Hackett said and he turned his attention forward. “Helm, all stop.”

“All stop, aye, sir,” replied Davies as the ship came to a halt.

“Plot a course to Inea and have it ready,” Hackett asked.

Benson replied, “Yes, sir.”